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ABSTRACT

Rural America and its schools (which encompass nearly two-thirds of the 15,600 school districts in the United States) face an incredible array of challenges. Changes in demographic, economic, and social conditions are creating a new rural America which is beset by many problems. Rural poverty does not appear to be diminishing and researchers conclude that poverty has deleterious effects on home environment, which in turn has a major impact on educational achievement. While the rural population is now declining or growing at a lower rate than urban areas, rural areas are maintaining their traditional higher percentage of children and have a proportionately greater need for elementary and secondary education. There is a lack of precise information on rural education, but recent efforts are attempting to determine research agendas for rural education. Among the trends/issues in rural education propelled into the limelight by the events of educational reform are school consolidation and its alternatives; utilization of distance education strategies; teacher preparation, recruitment, and retention; and rural school effectiveness. Until the economic well-being of rural America is reinvigorated, the plight of its small, rural schools will be just one more piece of a much larger, unsolved puzzle. A bibliography lists 50 references. (NEC)

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Selected Trends and Issues in Rural Education and Small Schools

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Introduction

According to Brown (1987), the population of the United States is overwhelmingly metropolitan, yet in 1986 more than 56 million people--about a quarter of the population--lived in nonmetropolitan counties. Those 56 million persons were spread across 2,400 of the nation's 3,100 counties, making rural issues a concern in nearly all regions of the country.

Nearly two-thirds of the 15,600 public school districts in the United States are in areas designated as "rural," and half of all public schools and one-third of all classroom teachers are engaged in the educational process in those areas (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1980). Many of those schools face rural-specific staffing, expenditure, and instructional problems whose characteristics are different from those in urban areas (Dunne & Carlsen, 1981) and reflect some of the basic differences between rural and urban America.

Changes in demographic, economic, and social conditions are creating a new rural America which is beset by many problems but which is bringing a new self-awareness to its struggles for survival. The rural schools, their staffs, and the communities they serve are more creatively engaged in the rural education process than at any time in the last 30 years. Rural and small schools are at the center of the problems, are caught up in the process of community survival, and are increasingly seen as part of the solutions. To understand the pressures on rural and small schools, the issues affecting the entire rural community need to be considered.

Changes happening in rural America only serve to underscore its amazing diversity and vitality. Rural New England is quite different from rural Iowa, and both are quite different from rural Alaska or rural Texas. There is no question but that many of these areas are undergoing difficult and sometimes painful change. After a decade of growth, rural income, population, and overall economic activity have stalled.

Economic Conditions

The economic problems now facing rural America encompass more than just a financially troubled agricultural sector. The economic diversity of rural America often goes unrecognized, with manufacturing forming its economic backbone, contrary to the popular notion that rural counties depend mostly on farming (Henry, Drabenstott, & Gibson, 1987). By 1984, more than 22% of all U.S.

wage and salary manufacturing employment was in rural America, with roughly 40% of the nation's rural citizens living in counties primarily dependent on manufacturing. In many rural areas wage gains have outstripped productivity gains, leaving industries vulnerable to foreign competition (Deavers, 1987).

One change that has hurt rural areas is the deregulation or privatization of airlines, telecommunications, and postal delivery services. These policies (1) have made it relatively cheaper to travel, ship, or communicate between big cities than between rural destinations, and (2) have served to discourage businesses from locating in rural areas (Mitchell, 1987).

Farm financial stress, however, is the most widely known of rural economic problems. American farmers are facing their most severe financial crisis since the 1930's. As a result of low prices, high interest rates, and falling land values, an unprecedented proportion of farmers is likely to be forced to quit farming in the next 2 to 5 years. The crisis is particularly affecting young farmers who entered farming after 1970 (Murdock, Albrecht, Hamm, Leistritz, & Lenholm, 1986). A large number of rural jurisdictions are losing up to 20% of their assessed valuations in a 1 or 2 year period because of a drop in the value of farmland. School districts are suffering the most because of their reliance on property taxes for a major portion of their revenue (Stephens, 1986).

Rural Poverty

Rural poverty does not appear to be diminishing for a variety of reasons. Unemployment and low-wage, labor-intensive manufacturing subject to foreign competition are concentrated in rural areas. Continued foreign competition with resultant increased unemployment contributes further to the proportionately greater number of lower income people already residing in rural areas (Hoppe, 1987).

According to Bedics (1987), these are examples of geographic and personal characteristics associated with rural poverty:

-The South has the highest incidence of poverty, with 41% of the nation's poor and 13% of its rural poverty.

-Whites constitute a majority of the rural poor, but persons of minority status are overrepresented (about 41% of all rural blacks and 26% of all rural Hispanics live in poverty).

-The rural poor are more likely to be in the work force than the urban poor and their income is primarily earned income which comes from low-wage, unskilled employment.

-The rural poor tend to have more children than their nonpoor rural counterparts.

-Rural people who reside in persistently poor areas have lower levels of education than the rural nonpoor (only about

41% of those rural poor aged 25 and older have a high school education whereas about 60% of the total nonmetropolitan population has achieved that).

Where poverty exists, it is pervasive and punitive. As reflected by Kaufman (1987), researchers from many disciplines have reached the common conclusion that poverty has deleterious effects on the home environment, which in turn has a major impact on educational achievement.

Rural Population

In late 1986, experts noted that a turning point had been reached in interstate migration patterns but that no clear new patterns had yet emerged ("Interstate Migration," 1986). By spring of 1987, however, Brown (1987) indicated that the surprising and demographically significant "population growth turnaround" of the 1970's and early 1980's was definitely over, with rural areas now declining or growing at a lower rate than urban areas.

Farm financial stress resulted in a steady population loss in 60% of the nation's farming-dependent counties during 1980-84, as compared to population drops of only 29% in other rural counties (Petrulis, Green, Hines, Nolan, & Sommer, 1987). In addition, farm financial stress and other pressures on the rural economy have caused old definitions and perceptions to be revised. Farm persons are generally thought of as persons living on farms, and at the beginning of the 20th century, that definition was accurate. According to Banks (1986), however, many people who now live on farms work elsewhere and many people who work on farms now live elsewhere.

One characteristic of rural population has not changed, however. Rural areas have traditionally had a higher proportion of children, relatively fewer younger adults and middle-aged persons, and larger proportions of the elderly. Accordingly, nonmetro areas have a proportionately greater need for elementary and secondary education (Brown, 1987).

One thing the various economic crises have accomplished is the development of a rural population which is increasingly aware of world events and the internationalization of the economy. Also contributing to this larger world view is the influx of newcomers brought by the urban to rural migration of the 1970's and early 1980's. Although that migration has begun to slow--and to even turnaround in some places--its impact on rural communities seems likely to be long felt. The newcomers brought higher expectations for all public services (including schools), methods of more aggressive problem definition and solution than had been practiced before, and a greater understanding of the political process and how it can be used (Rios, 1987).

Rural Policy

Increasingly, politically aware communities are calling for

greater policy definition at all levels of government, realization by policymakers that policies impact urban and rural areas differently, and recognition that rural areas generally have fewer economic options than urban areas. These same rural communities are increasingly seeing their schools as elements in policy implementation. Schools have traditionally been the social centerpiece of rural life, but they are undergoing closer scrutiny as the means of providing continuing education, attracting industry, and interfacing between the community and the larger context. In support of that view, Deavers (1987) comments that education, communications, and transportation policies are among the keys to rural development.

There is a tendency to look to the establishment of national policy as a means of utilizing these keys to rural development. The history of policy efforts, however, provides a cautionary note that should be applied when considering rural policy that effectuates rural programs. The goals of rural programs have typically not been defined with precision (Long, Reid, & Deavers, 1987). Resulting programs have tended to serve three broad purposes:

-increasing agricultural income;

-stimulating regional economic development; and

-enhancing the general quality of life in small, rural communities.

The gently beneficient quality of that last purpose is exemplified in the title of Secretary of Education Terrell H. Bell's 1983 Department of Education policy statement, "Rural Education and Rural Family Education Policies for the 80's" (Hill, 1984). Issuance of the policy statement followed a programmatic lapse characterized by Sher (1978) as evidence of historic inequity in federal programs for rural education. The new policy stated that rural education would receive an equitable share of the information, services, assistance, and funds available from and through the Department of Education and its programs. Implementation of the policy was set forth in a number of initiatives, with oversight to be conducted by the Intra-Agency Committee on Rural Education composed of representatives from each of the 14 major offices of the Department of Education. The Committee coordinates rural education activities within the Department of Education and has sponsored national rural education conferences. Dr. John Pucciano recently became chair of the committee. He also serves as the Department of Education's representative on the White House's Interdepartmental Task Force for Rural Development ("U.S. Department of Education," 1987).

Although not expressed as administrative policy, the most recent visible establishment of legislative priority for rural education was the Congressional appropriation in the fall of 1986 of $4 million to the regional education labs. The labs were directed to "identify and support further development of promising rural

small-school activities and practices within their regions" (Arends, 1987, p. 1). Following completion of a national survey to aid in goal setting, the labs are now engaged in further information gathering necessary for the accomplishment of their mandate.

It is not always easy to implement federally sponsored education programs in rural America. As an example, the Department of Education's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services recently identified seven major problems in providing special education and related services to handicapped children and youth in rural areas ("ED's Office of," 1986):

-the absence of a consistently applied definition of "rural"

-difficulties in recruiting qualified staff

-difficulties in retaining qualified staff

-adequate preservice training needs

-appropriate inservice training needs

-effective service delivery

-gaps in research

Research in Rural Education

There is a lack of precise information on rural education. In addition, DeYoung (1987) finds much of the available scholarship on rural education relatively unsophisticated compared with most research in mainstream educational journals. He concludes that unlike many other specialized fields of educational scholarship and research, not only is the literature on rural education in the U.S. quite diverse (and of uneven quality), but it also depends much more explicitly on historical, comparative, political, and economic interpretations.

In spite of the complexities involved, and as required by Secretary Bell's policy initiative, the Department of Education does "work to expand the data base on the condition of education in rural areas" (Hill & Rios, 1984, p. 16). The completed work of the educational labs' Rural Initiative will represent the largest single rural education effort supported by the Department in many years. It is anticipated that such an effort will make a sound contribution to scholarly work in rural education.

With encouragement from the Department, other groups have also been pressing forward to determine research agendas for rural education. Similar issues are reflected--but in different ways--in the two rural education research agendas derived by the National Rural Education Association and the National Rural Education Research Consortium.

The National Rural Education Association's Research Committee in 1986 queried superintendents of small schools as to how useful research on certain issues would be to them (Hubel, 1986). The top five responses focused on determining:

1. Strategies which capitalize on strengths of small schools and seek to correct deficiencies

2. Strategies to stabilize revenue while operating on a small tax base

3. Successful practices/programs in rural elementary and secondary schools that can be replicated

4. Creation of new revenue sources and alternative funding formulas for rural schools

5. Characteristics of effective rural schools from both elementary and secondary perspectives.

The bottom five responses dealt with determining where America's rural schools are located, how they are defined or classified, and who attends them.

The National Rural Education Research Consortium surveyed a more broadly based group (public schools, colleges and universities, and other agencies) to determine how general and special educators viewed the importance of research for improving rural education (McGregor, 1986). The 13 themes ranked as follows:

1. rural school effectiveness

2. curriculum development needs and issues

3. inservice training

4. preservice teacher training

5. personnel recruitment and retention

6. service delivery models

7. use of advanced technology

8. rural education cost effectiveness

9. school-community interaction and partnerships

10. teaching and leadership styles

11. alternative funding systems

12. characteristics of rural and non-rural school students

13. federal and state policies and legal procedures

The importance of this kind of problem and research needs prioritization is that formal attention has now been focused on the kinds of issues rural and small school educators have long been saying needed resolution. The next steps should be embodied in definitive research, continued community interest, and the kinds of legislative action--at all levels--that will facilitate or support ameliorative efforts to correct deficiencies in educational opportunities in rural America.

In summarizing the results of his review of the status of American rural education research, DeYoung (1987), however, cites several perspectives which are held by most scholars who work in the field:

-Rural education has been a stepchild to other aims and interests of professional educators and researchers alike.

-Administrative, curricular, and staffing solutions to educational problems in metropolitan America may or may not have utility for rural education.

-Demographic, economic, administrative, vocational, and community differences and needs existing in many rural regions of the country demand more particular attention from educational researchers and policymakers if rural schools are ever to achieve their full potential.

-The fate of rural schools is integrally related to larger rural policy questions in the U.S.

-Rural Americans must develop the political clout to be heard and reckoned with at the national level if their needs and aspirations are to be met.

Effects of Educational Reform Efforts

The results of reform efforts triggered by publication of A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform (Gardner et al, 1983) had short term, deleterious effects on rural education. By raising requirements--and expectations--for educational productivity, the reform movement underscored rural education's shortcomings, among them a lack of teachers with in-depth curricular training, a lack of language courses, a lack of advanced courses in math and science, and a lack of computer science courses. State after state mandated increased graduation requirements and increased academic curricular offerings. Among the trends or issues propelled into the limelight by the events of educational reform are the following:

-the issue of consolidation and its alternatives;

-the trend toward utilization of distance education strategies;

-the issue of preparing, finding, and keeping staff for rural and small schools; and

-the issue of rural school effectiveness.

Consolidation and Alternatives

Whenever critical examination of rural education occurs, the possibility of school consolidation or merger is often advanced as a means of improving educational opportunity in rural areas. Stephens (1986) notes that while over 77% of this nation's school districts--mainly rural--enroll fewer than 2,500 students in grades K-12, in the period from 1930-31 to 1982-83 the number of school districts decreased from 127,531 to about 16,000. The surge of concern attendant to the reform movement has once again brought consolidation to the forefront, although closer scrutiny reveals that there are probably not too many willing consolidations remaining. Monk and Haller (1986), for example, conclude that while single-minded pursuit of district reorganization may once have made sense, by 1986 district reorganization--at least in New York State--had largely run its course.

It is obvious that consolidation or merger ought to be considered as an organizational option within or among some of the remaining 16,000 school districts. What is equally obvious is that the issue of consolidation becomes an emotional issue since it involves the concern for community survival. According to Peshkin (1982), in troubled times schools may become battle grounds as people perceive that their school is jeopardized by local or state policies. Stephens (1986) reflects the concern of many when he writes that the demise of the rural school will damage the infrastructure of the large rural areas of the nation. He says it is important that the centerpiece of rural life--the rural school--be alive, healthy, and available.

The literature on consolidation and its effectiveness is inconclusive. Its proponents have tended to approach the situation as an application in economic theory. In their summary of applications of economic theory to community services, Doeksen and Peterson (1987) identify research issues in six high priority areas, including education. Education was analyzed through the concept of economies of size and their literature review found recommendations that ranged from consolidation is unlikely to solve the financial problems of schools, to school systems realize economies of size as student enrollment approaches 1,500.

The case of North Carolina is probably typical of the current parry and thrust of consolidation efforts throughout the various states. In 1986 the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction issued a report calling for mandatory merging of certain schools and citing the need for all North Carolina school systems to have at least 5,000 students (Sher, 1986).

Reacting at the behest of the North Carolina School Boards

Association, Sher (1986, pp. 9-10) makes five key points:

-"Merger decisions are too complex and far-reaching in their impact to be made any way other than on a case-by-case basis--and as a result of a thorough and impartial assessment of all relevant factors and perspectives.

-Good schools and school districts come in all shapes and sizes (as do poor ones)--and therefore, educational policies which place too much reliance on any rigid size and organizational criteria are likely to have counterproductive effects.

-Since directly mandating across-the-board mergers will not advance any compelling state interest, the state should discontinue all "backdoor" approaches to the same end.

-There are a variety of alternatives to consolidation that can expand educational opportunities and enhance cost effectiveness without abolishing existing units.

-Organizational issues like merger are very rarely the key to enhancing the quality and efficiency of public education."

In March of 1987 the Department of Public Instruction countered with a manual designed to aid boards of education, school administrators, and others in exploring the possibilities of merger (Bridgman, 1987). The manual reviews legal requirements for mergers, suggests steps to follow if merger seems right, and cites advantages/problems/obstacles encountered in merger situations.

As they reviewed the same issue for New York, Monk and Haller (1986) recommended that the State increase the range of alternatives to its school districts, specifically:

-Procedures should be implemented that would permit the partial reorganization of school districts.

-Opportunities should be broadened for institutionalized sharing among neighboring school districts.

-Increased support should be provided for development and demonstration projects involving interactive telecommunications.

These recommended alternatives for New York are typical of those being considered by many states and school districts.

Distance Education Strategies

Batey and Cowell (1986) describe distance education as a current "catch all" phrase for something as old as correspondence courses and as new as interactive instruction by satellite. Recognizing the complexity of the problems facing rural education and small schools, they list six ways distance education can contribute to

rural education (Batey & Cowell, 1986):

-by providing equity and increasing quality of educational opportunity;

-by providing access to subject matter experts or career role models not available in the local community;

-by providing interaction and joint activities with students in other schools;

-by providing increased access to information and instructional resources;

-by providing opportunities for staff development and inservice training; and

-by promoting increased school/community linkages.

Delivery options for distance education fall into four categories: print based, audio based, video based, and computer based. The technology based options currently are popular and include (Wall, 1985; Reynolds, 1986; Barker, 1987a):

-audio teleconferencing

-videotaped lessons

-interactive television

-interactive video

-computer networks

Delivery is accomplished by a variety of methods, including (Batey & Cowell, 1986; Barker, 1987b; West, Robinson, & Collins, 1986; Musegades, 1986):

-electronic mail

-satellite transmission

-instructional television fixed service

-cable TV

Televised classes which permit live teacher/student interaction are perhaps the biggest educational breakthrough since the computer (Barker, 1987c). Currently there are four interactive instructional television satellite systems beaming to students scattered throughout the continental United States: the TI-IN Network, Oklahoma State University's Arts and Sciences Teleconferencing Service, the Utah State Office of Education's Accelerated Learning of Spanish Program, and Eastern Washington's Telecommunication Project.

A study by Barker (1987d) of 159 students and their schools who use the largest system, the TI-IN Network, found that most satellite classes fluctuated between 8 or 9 students, over 80% of the principals stated that satellite courses had become an integral part of their school's curriculum, 65% of the students found satellite courses to be more difficult than regular courses, and students offered several suggestions for improving the system.

There are many elements to consider before a district becomes involved with a satellite network. Some states, however, are developing their own systems and this committment will reduce decisionmaking efforts on the part of individual districts. Missouri, for example, has established the Educational Satellite Network. Two hundred downlink dishes have already been installed in public elementary and secondary education districts, with most of the State's 545 districts to be served by the end of 1989 (Barker, 1987c).

Staff Preparation, Recruitment, and Retention in Rural and Small Schools

Superintendents of small school districts consider teacher recruitment and retention their most pressing problem. School board presidents of small districts agree that the most desirable trait for prospective superintendents is that they must enjoy living in a rural area. Reasons for high staff turnover include the following (Swift, 1984):

-Preservice preparation is presently more suitable for large, metropolitan schools than for small, rural schools.

-Career orientations fail to recognize that experience in small schools advances future plans and goals.

-Teachers often have inadequate experiential and psychological preparation for the demands and limitations of small schools and rural communities.

-There may be a mismatch of personal value systems and rural life-styles.

-There is discontinuity between idyllic expectations and harsh realities.

-Administrators of small school districts sometimes employ inappropriate and inadequate recruitment strategies.

There is some general agreement that both teachers and administrators working in rural areas should be trained as generalists rather than specialists (Gardener & Edington, 1982; Swift, 1985; Kennedy & Barker, 1986; Steinmiller & Bell, 1986).

Since preservice preparation is directed more toward urban than rural schools (Swift, 1984), then the alternative would appear to

be some form of in-service program after teachers are hired. The use of peer teams--with much feedback--seems to be one strategy currently being used in rural in-service programs (Richardson, 1985; Flanagan & Trueblood, 1986; Phelps & Wright, 1986). These efforts commonly consist of identifying key teachers, providing them with specific training in effective teaching strategies (often leading to an advanced degree), and using peer review through video tapes or observation to maintain an emphasis on improvement.

The issues surrounding teacher preparation and professional development for rural and small schools--like other rural issues--are complex and interrelated. Their resolution must recognize the interdependence of teacher education institutions, state agencies, school districts, and teachers (Swift, 1985), and must be creative in utilizing technology and other alternative systems in developing programs that are attractive in concept and deliverable in reality.

Effectiveness of Rural Schools

The need for research in the area of rural school effectiveness ranked in the top five research needs in the research agendas of both the National Rural Education Association (Hubel, 1986) and the National Rural Education Research Consortium (McGregor, 1986).

DeYoung (1987) reports that while the topic of "effective schooling" rates high with rural education researchers and school professionals, defining, researching, and improving school effectiveness may be conceptually even more difficult in many rural schools than it is nationally, because of the diversity of expectations rural residents seem to have for their schools.

It is in this very area of rural school effectiveness that research is most needed, judging from the kinds of questions that are received at the Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools. Although there is much discussing and prioritizing, there seems to be little activity on the national level. Perhaps the total picture will evolve as a mosaic, with the pieces--denoting the diversity of rural America--being filled in as manageable, local studies gradually contribute to the greater whole (Talbert, Fletcher, & Phelps, 1987).

Summary

Rural America--and its schools--face an incredible array of challenges. In addition to the issues touched upon here, there is the issue of the rural students themselves. They are the stuff of which schools are made and yet we know very little about them. What is their academic achievement? How well do they perform in higher education? What are their dropout rates, drug problems, retention rates, etc.? So very much needs to be done in all areas that it is difficult to know where to begin.

Duane Nielsen, then Chair of the Department of Education's Intra-

Agency Committee on Rural Education, acknowledged the breadth of the problem in October 1986 when he addressed the Annual Conference of the National Rural and Small Schools Consortium (Nielsen, 1986, p. 9):

> Those of us charged with managing and administering educational programs in rural areas are approaching a task of herculean proportions: reconciling unprecedented demands for educational services on the one hand and carrying out programs in an environment of diminished local capacity to support current levels of educational services on the other. Without doubt, well planned and delivered educational services will pay handsome dividends on a cost-benefit basis, but new strategies will be needed as shifts occur in funding patterns and in leadership in rural areas. The challenge to rural educators at all levels will be awesome.

Distance education is one strategy which is being given a good opportunity to prove its value. Other new strategies may be forthcoming from the regional laboratories' efforts to identify promising practices or from the energized rural research agendas.

In the meantime, essential questions concerning the economic crisis in rural America beg for solutions. Until the economic well being of rural America is reinvigorated, the plight of its small, rural schools will be just one more piece of a much larger, unsolved puzzle.

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